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THE DIFFERENTIATION OF THE HIGH SCHOOL
COURSE IN ENGLISH.*

The discussion of this immense subject will necessarily be very brief, and I cannot touch more than a few of its many elements. The first point I want to make is this:—for the past ten years we have all been listening to an extraordinary denunciation of college requirements for admission in English, and indeed, denunciation of the whole influence of colleges on secondary schools. It is alleged that the requirements of the colleges have impaired the value of secondary schools, have affected injuriously the style of teaching in schools, and have tended to limit painfully the freedom of secondary school teachers. Now the subject of English is a very recent one in any schools of English-speaking people, primary or secondary. It is comparatively a very recent subject in colleges themselves. Who introduced the subject of English into the whole series of schools from bottom to top? The colleges! What was the subject-matter of instruction in English before the year 1870 in American schools? English grammar, than which a more inappropriate subject cannot be conceived. As a matter of fact, where did this teaching of English language and literature in whatever method arise? Where did it come from? From the new requirements in English for admission to college! How long ago was that? 1870! We have only had forty years of experience with this new subject and method of school instruction. Naturally, we have not got a perfect system yet, but let us all remember that the topic itself as a subject of instruction in schools came from the colleges.

*President Eliot's remarks during the discussion at the meeting of the New England Association of Teachers of English, Boston, March 18, 1911.

Secondly, let us consider for a moment the quality of these lists of books issued by college examination boards, which are recommended for use in secondary schools. Can anybody question the fact that those lists consist exclusively of specimens of English literature which it is in the highest degree desirable that boys and girls from fourteen to eighteen, whose mother tongue is English, should be made acquainted with? I venture to say that no book has ever been recommended in the college lists of English with which it is not distinctly desirable that the school population in an English-speaking country should be made acquainted. It may not always be practical to make the pupils acquainted with all of them; but it is highly desirable that they should all be acquainted with most of the specimens of English contained in those lists.

But we are constantly told that the population of the schools itself has changed profoundly; and that what was fit as literary material in the schools of forty years ago, or even of twenty years ago, is unfit today. Let us look for a moment at the precise nature of this change. The first striking feature of the change is the advent of large numbers of pupils whose mother tongue is not English,—aliens we call them. We were all aliens a century or two ago; but these are new aliens, and many of them have not learned English, at least as a mother tongue. The fact is plain. There are 5,000 Greeks in Lowell; there are 40,000 French-Canadians in Fall River; there is an immense diversity of alien population in the city of New York. Nobody can question the fact. How much should that affect the teaching of English literature in American schools? Is it clear, in the first place, that these alien races are less intelligent than what we try to call the American race in this country? Is it at all clear that the minds of the Russian Jews, the Italians, the Armenians, and the Greeks, are any less capable of enjoying English literature than the minds of the so-called American children? To my mind it is not only not clear, but it seems to me that the actual facts demonstrate that all those races I have mentioned are highly capable of enjoying English literature if only they go at it in the right way. For instance, the best acting by children I ever saw in my life was by a large number of Russian-Jew children on the East Side of New York, and they were acting an English play, "The Prince and the Pauper."

We have a few Italians coming into Harvard College, chiefly from the Boston Latin School, and there is not the slightest doubt

that they are capable of comprehending English literature, and enjoying it to the full. Some years ago Mrs. Eliot and I were sitting in the coupé of a diligence in the Italian Tyrol and talking together, when an Italian gentleman with only one leg (he had lost the other in the War of 1866 between Austria and Italy) climbed with great difficulty into the coupé and sat down beside us. He had not been there more than a minute before he said in accents distinctly recognizable as Shakespearian, "Might I have the great privilege of listening to your conversation?" He had been a diligent student of English literature, but had seldom heard the language spoken. We were much with this gentleman during the next twenty-four hours, and he told us that he had read all the European literatures, and that the English immeasurably surpassed every other. He gave some very good reasons for this belief, such as amplitude, richness, and variety of form, and general high level with superb climaxes. He had read much of American literature, notably Lowell and Longfellow. He had never heard of Whittier, so when I got home I sent him a volume of Whittier's poems, which he promptly acknowledged, expressing his great interest and pleasure in the poems, and specifying the poem which most delighted him. It was that beautiful hymn,—

"Another hand is beckoning us,
Another call is given,
And glows once more with angel steps,
The path which leads to Heaven."

That was the thing he picked out from all of Whittier's works as the finest; but he delighted in them all. Now, there was an Italian's opinion about English literature. There was the effect of English literature on the mind of an educated Italian, who earned a modest living as a country lawyer.

Shall we imagine that the Italians, who are more and more coming to our shores, are not going to be open in school to the delights of English literature, to the joys of good reading? We must go somewhat farther. In late years, there have come to Harvard College a considerable number of Chinese students. At a dinner given to Ex-Governor Montague of Virginia by the Southern Club, a rather select group of young Southerners in Harvard College, the Governor made some allusions to the color-line; so when I had my chance to speak I remarked, "We must reconsider the

color-line business; for we have men of a new color in Harvard College, and they seem to be people of remarkable capacity in English as well as in other western subjects." Later the president of the club said, "I should like to add something to what President Eliot has said about these Chinese. I sit between two Chinamen in Philosophy 6, and those two fellows can both take better notes in English of the lecture given in English than I can, and when it comes to examinations, I borrow their notes." That is the highest testimonial one student can give another.

It does not follow, ladies and gentlemen, that the coming into our schools of large numbers of the races we call alien is going to make more difficult the teaching of English, except indeed at the very outset.

There is another and much more important change in our schools. This is the public desire to send the children, while in school, in the different directions which they are to take later in life. That is a policy never thought of in the high schools of the country until comparatively recent years. The high school course was held to be a cultural course, adapted pretty well to everybody. That is no longer the thought about even the high school course. We perceive a serious change in the needed courses of study in the schools, and in their recognition of variety of faculty and difference of direction in the pupils themselves. How ought that to affect the teaching of English? As has been mentioned twice in these papers of today,—only by giving it a more important place. The fewer the cultural subjects in American schools, the more importance must be attached to English literature and English composition.

Still another change has come over the American schools quite within my memory. There is less driving. The driving was always unsuccessful, never produced any real interest in literature or in scholarship, never really made the boy or the girl who was driven a more promising person for the future in relation to English literature or art. The driving was unsuccessful; but it was the spirit of the schools. Now there is much less attempt at driving. What has taken its place? The attempt to lead, and inspire, and interest. That is an enormous improvement; but it is an improvement that involves a very considerable change in the teaching of English in general, the language as well as the literature. We have to make use of methods which interest the children themselves. Now those methods abound. There are plenty of

them. We heard just now an excellent description of an interesting method which depended for efficiency on motives within the children themselves. We must place more reliance in teaching English and English literature on the things which awaken emotion, stimulate interest, prove to be enjoyable, and result in giving the children some power of entertaining other people, of giving enjoyment. That was the marvel in the presentation of "The Prince and the Pauper" which I saw in the old Bowery of New York—the enjoyment of the children in their work. Three sets of actors were appointed for each play staged; in order that more children might have the enjoyment of entertaining a thousand of their kindred and friends who made up the audience at each performance. The house was always packed at ten cents a seat; and the enjoyment of the audience was great. To be able to give such pleasure is a great advantage and incitement for any child. We must try to give our pupils some little power of literary expression, in order to give them this joy in performance, in work, in achievement. Committing to memory beautiful pieces of literature for recitation before an audience, acting charades, and reading aloud with vivacity and expression, are good means of instruction. A teacher who has gifts in any of these directions can enlist some pupils in such exercises through their imitative faculty. We must try to make the children enjoy literature, just as we want adults to enjoy literature; in the hope of implanting in their minds the love of reading.

These, then, are the great differences which we perceive in our schools, and the consequent changes to be made in the discipline and methods of the schools. But as we listened to the papers this morning, did we not say to ourselves, "One of our troubles is that we cannot differentiate enough in the schools; we cannot give enough individual instruction?" We cannot address straight to the individual boy or girl the teaching which fits him or her; for the towns and cities will not appropriate money enough to pay for individual teaching. It is impossible for a young woman with sixty-five, fifty-six, or forty pupils before her, to give individual instruction. Perhaps with not more than forty she can give a little attention to individuals, but not with sixty-five or fifty-six. Until we lower that standard of the number of pupils before a single teacher, the best instruction in English literature will not be practicable in our schools. Until we dismiss the notion that

there is such a thing as "an average child," we cannot teach any literature well.

In regard to the perception of literary excellencies, children differ infinitely; and children in the same family often exhibit extraordinary differences. I have repeatedly seen in families in which I was very much interested the impossibility of addressing the same instruction in English and in literature to all the members of the same family group. The differentiation must get down to the individual before we can obtain the best results. Of course, the same is true in the right teaching of many other subjects—medicine, for instance. All medical teaching is now addressed straight to the individual, and none other is good for much. It is particularly true in regard to inspiring the love of reading and then gratifying the desire, that the individual must be studied. I hope this suggestion does not seem to you too hard. I hope it does not seem undemocratic, to use the word which Dr. Lowell used. Democracy is not equality; it does not involve any equality whatever, not even that equality of opportunity which I notice some eminent statesmen are much in the habit of dwelling upon. There is, indeed, no such thing as equality of opportunity, because the value of an opportunity depends entirely on the ability to seize it, and the ability varies infinitely. In reality, the democracy has more interest in developing the diversities in children, and matching these diversities within the public schools, than it has, or ever has had, in any doctrine of equality.

The prospects with regard to good teaching of English literature and English composition seem to me clearly encouraging. I trust that we have got over some of the early objections made to teaching English literature at all in schools and colleges. When I said that English literature was not taught at all in American schools forty years ago, I ought to have added that this best of literatures was not taught in American colleges forty years ago. We have gained immensely during the past generation, and we are going to gain a deal more; because the English language is going round the globe, and English literature is the supreme literature of all time.

EDITOR'S NOTES.

With the printing of this address, which Dr. Eliot delivered at the March meeting of our Association, the trilogy on "Differentiation" ends. Both contentions have been admirably presented, and each teacher of English may now be confident of authoritative support, no difference which view he accepts. But in the words of Sir Roger—now, alas! our friend of possible differentiability—there is still much to be said on both sides. In view of the keen interest felt throughout the country, the theme is bound to recur. The circular enclosed presents varied phases of the topic which the English Round Table of the National Education Association is now investigating. Professor Greenough and the editor will welcome your personal views and will gladly communicate them to the general committee.

If there are members or friends of the Association who desire a reprint of our Leaflets in book form, and who have not yet sent in their subscriptions, the plea is urgent that replies be mailed without delay. The Executive Committee at a recent session, decided that unless there was an immediate and generous response, the enterprise would be temporarily abandoned. Additional subscription blanks will be furnished on request.

—The Editor.

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